City of Sunnyvale Writing Style Guidelines

When writing for the City of Sunnyvale, in general, your tone should be friendly, welcoming and jargon-free. To enhance the professionalism and consistency of City communication, you should follow these guidelines for internal and external written communication.

Our writing style guidelines include stylistic standards, such as correct use of abbreviations and punctuation, and a plain language checklist and resources.

- Plain Language Writing Checklist
- Quick Reference Guide for Style

What is plain language?

Plain language involves focusing written communication on the needs of the intended audience. With everything you publish, your audience should be able to:

- **Find** what they need
- **Understand** what they find
- **Use** that information to meet their needs

One relatively easy way to achieve this style is to write with a specific person or group of people in mind. Typically, you want to picture your audience and write to them in a conversational tone — avoiding City-specific language or jargon — with the authority of someone who can actively help. Your goal is to connect with your readers through writing that is easy for them to understand.

Plan your writing

It’s said that good writing is rewriting, but smart planning will lay the foundation for effective copy. And quality writing takes time, so you want to plan for it.

- Identify your audience
- Focus on one topic or goal
- Anticipate reader questions
- Address the needs of the reader – lead your content with the reader’s interests in mind

Model Hemingway’s four rules for writing

Ernest Hemingway was known for his sparse, dynamic writing style. Here are his four rules of writing that have become a cornerstone for clear communication:

- Use short sentences
- Use short paragraphs
- Use “vigorous” English – use strong, clear words with no wasted words
- Have a positive slant – write what something is rather than what it isn’t

Use the HemingwayApp, an online tool, to help make your writing clear and concise.

AP style – follow City's stylistic standards

Although rules exist for grammar and punctuation, not all questions of writing style have a right or wrong answer. Establishing a preferred style helps an organization achieve a consistent presentation throughout an array of printed and electronic communication.

The City uses the Associated Press (or AP style) as the default writing style. AP style is a writing style used by journalists worldwide to ensure consistency and clarity.

The *AP Stylebook* website provides two options for purchasing the style guide. A bound *AP Stylebook* and an annual subscription to an online version can each be purchased for a nominal cost. Both resources provide guidance for common terms, capitalization, punctuation and clarity of writing style.

For spelling, style and usage questions not covered in the *AP Stylebook*, consult *Webster's New World College Dictionary, Fifth Edition*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston and New York (Dictionary is available free online).

Writing Resources

- PlainLanguage.gov
- HemingwayApp
- Grammerly app – free grammar checker
- ProWritingAid.com – free grammar checker for new writers

Recent Updates

Updates to the Style Guide since last revision.

Abbreviations and acronyms – updated

Bullets – updated

Headings – updated

Hyphens – updated

Inclusive language (new)

Internet terms –
- homepage (lowercase)
- webpage (one word)
- Wi-Fi (new)

Percent – use the percent % sign when paired with a numeral, with no space. See entry for more detail.

Quotation marks – updated

Years (new)

Spelling –
- flyer (AP Stylebook change) – for handbill, person flying in an aircraft

Plain Language Writing Checklist

Before starting to write, think about the most important thing you want your reader to learn, know or do. Is there a call-to-action (subscribe, attend meeting, pay)?

Review your content with the checklist below, along with the Quick Reference Style Guide.

The most important thing is:

____

____

____

Before you start writing

Audience

Consider your potential readers.
Who is your audience exactly? Are there multiple audiences? Remember, there is no “general public.”

Evaluate the needs of your readers.
What is the benefit to your audience – why should they care about your topic? What do they want, or need to know? How much detail do they need? What is the right tone for this audience?

Answer their questions.
Write down the questions most of your readers will have about your topic. In what logical order would these questions occur?

Writing Checklist

Organization

☐ Identified and written for the typical reader
You have identified your audience and know their level of understanding of the topic. If there are multiple audiences, you have addressed them separately.

☐ Organized to serve the reader’s needs
Organize your content in the order the reader needs it.

☐ Main point is first
Generally, readers appreciate content that begins with the main point or message.

Word Choice

☐ Uses familiar words
Don’t use big or complicated words. Don’t use jargon. Define (and limit) acronyms and abbreviations. Instead of acronyms, after using the complete term the first time, use nicknames such as “the board,” “the agency” or “the plan.”

☐ Uses 'you,' 'we' and other pronouns to speak to the reader

Using pronouns makes the content more conversational and makes directions more meaningful. Use 'you' to address the reader. Use "I" when writing from the reader's point of view, such as in a Q&A section. Use "we" for the City, department or staff. *Example: Use 'You must provide a copy of your license' NOT 'A copy of the license must be provided.'*

☐ Uses active voice

Use active voice whenever possible. Active voice makes it clear who or what (the subject) is doing the action (the verb). *Example: 'The agency conducted the study' NOT 'The study was conducted by the agency.'*

☐ Uses base verbs, not hidden verbs

Example: Use 'we reported to council' NOT 'we presented a report to council.'

☐ Uses the simplest tense possible – simple present tense is best

Example: Use 'Every year we update the report' NOT 'Every year we will update the report.'

☐ Uses 'must' to express requirements

Use 'must' not 'shall' or 'will' for requirements. 'Shall' and 'will' are ambiguous.

☐ Places words carefully (avoids large gaps between the subject, verb and the object; puts exceptions last; places modifiers correctly). Avoid complex, confusing sentence construction.

☐ Omits excess words

Ruthlessly remove any word that is not absolutely necessary. Eliminate modifiers, such as 'absolutely.'

Design

☐ Has useful headings

On the web, users scan and often only read headings (along with link text and bulleted text). In documents, headings help readers navigate the material. The heading should apply to all content that follows. If it doesn't, add subheadings.

☐ Uses short sentences and paragraphs

Try to write paragraphs of no more than 5 to 7 sentences and an average sentence length of 20 words or fewer for a document. For web content try for an average of 15 words and no longer than 25 words. Paragraphs should be no more than 1 to 3 sentences for the web. Single sentence paragraphs are fine.

☐ Uses lists and tables to simplify complex material

Lists are easy for readers to skim. Use numbered lists when steps matter. Even two bullets under one sentence is easier to read. Refer to bulleted lists for more detail.

☐ Uses relevant, high-quality and uncluttered images or diagrams if needed

Images and diagrams may clarify content in a document. Images in documents that will be available online must have appropriate alternative text included for users of assistive devices.

Punctuation and Linking

☐ Uses periods or dashes instead of semicolons

It is better to use two shorter sentences instead of sentences joined with semicolons. It is fine to start a sentence with 'And,' 'But' or 'Or' if clear and improves brevity.

☐ Uses keywords for link text instead of "click here" "here" or "learn more"

Link text should inform the user as to the destination of the link. *Example: Use 'Read the draft document' NOT 'The draft document can be found here.'*

Review

☐ Read the content aloud to hear whether it's understandable

When you read aloud you'll be able to hear if the meaning is unclear, or if it's written in a bureaucratic manner.

☐ Had someone else read content for comprehension

Having someone who is unfamiliar with the topic read your content and provide feedback will point out areas of confusion or lack of clarity.

☐ Checked content's Readability score

The average American reads at the 7th to 8th grade level. And 43% of adults in the U.S. read at a 6th grade level, or lower. Aim to have your content have an appropriate Readability score.

References

- PlainLanguage.gov
- Use simple words and phrases – list of words not to use and better choices

Writing Style Quick Reference Guide

This City of Sunnyvale writing style guide highlights some common AP style conventions as well as a few deviations from AP style (**deviations are marked with an asterisk**). This guide will be updated as needed. To suggest terms be added to this guide, contact Communications.

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abbreviations and acronyms

- Avoid the alphabet soup of using acronyms and abbreviations that the reader would not quickly recognize; use sparingly.
- If using them, the first reference should use the entire term.
- Do not add an abbreviation or acronym when the first reference is the only reference.
- Subsequent references of the same organization or term may use the acronym if it is obvious what it stands for. It is preferable to use a nickname in subsequent references, such as, *the agency, the plan, the board*.

Correct	**Incorrect**
The City and the Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) implemented a new program.	The City and the VTA implemented a new program.

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addresses

- Abbreviate street, boulevard and avenue (St., Blvd., Ave.) when used with a specific address.
- Abbreviate the compass points used to indicate directional ends of a street in a numbered address.
- Spell out numbers between one and nine unless a numeral is the official name of the street (e.g., "2nd Street")
- Use digits for numbers 10 and above.
- Street, avenue, etc. should be lowercase when referring to two streets.

Correct	**Incorrect**
The project is located on State Street.	The project is located on State St.
The project is located at 123 State St.	The project is located at 123 State Street.
The project is located at the corner of Main and State streets.	The project is located at the corner of Main and State Streets.
550 E. Remington Drive	550 East Remington Drive
456 W. Olive Ave.	456 West Olive Ave.
The project is located at 456 Wolfe Road.	The project is located at 456 Wolfe Rd.

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ampersand (&)

- Use only when part of a formal name; not a replacement for "and."
- * May use in tables and headings in presentation and printed materials for space considerations.

Correct	Incorrect
Baltimore & Ohio Railroad	Baltimore and Ohio Railroad
Sunnyvale and Mountain View	Sunnyvale & Mountain View
Previous meetings and materials	Previous meetings & materials

bulleted lists

- Series - Order by importance or priority; otherwise order short to long.
- Sequence - Order by what the reader should know or do first, second, third, etc.
- Capitalize the first word following the bullet or number.
- Match bullet formats for each item in a list: same sentence type, verb tense, voice (active or passive), starting with same part of speech (such as a verb), etc.
- Use numbers instead of bullets for sequential steps or actions.
- Use periods, not semicolons at the end of a full sentence. * Do not use punctuation for a phrase or fragment sentence.

Chinese

- Referring to the spoken language, use “Mandarin” (e.g., The meeting will have translation in Mandarin and Spanish)
- Referring to the written language, use “Chinese, Simplified”
- For formatting and details, see the Translation References and Formatting document on Sunspot, in the Communications section.

citizen

- Only countries can confer citizenship.
- “Citizen” is often used to refer to someone’s immigration status.
- It is preferred to refer to city constituents as members of the public, residents, community members or another similar term, not citizens.

city

- Capitalize when used as a proper name (e.g., New York City).
- Lowercase city in all other uses.
- When referring to Sunnyvale as the geographic city, use either *city of Sunnyvale* or *Sunnyvale*.
- * When referring to the municipal organization, use either the *City of Sunnyvale* or the *City*. Do not shorten *City of Sunnyvale* to *Sunnyvale*.

Correct	**Incorrect**
City of Sunnyvale	city of Sunnyvale
The City will hold a public meeting.	The city will hold a public meeting.
The boundaries of Sunnyvale extend to…	The boundaries of the City extend to…
The boundaries of the city of Sunnyvale extend to…	The boundaries of the City of Sunnyvale extend to…
City of Sunnyvale website	Sunnyvale website

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city council

- Capitalize when part of a proper name.
- Retain capitalization if reference is to a specific council.
- Use lowercase in other uses and for plural references.
  See "councilmember"

Correct	**Incorrect**
Sunnyvale City Council	The city council of Sunnyvale
The Council meets weekly	The council meets weekly
Sunnyvale and Cupertino city councils	Sunnyvale and Cupertino City Councils
A city council	A City Council

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city departments and facilities

- The reference to a department is in lowercase unless it is the department's complete proper name.
- When referencing multiple departments, the word "departments" is lowercase.
- When referencing a City department in external documents, City of Sunnyvale should precede the department name.
- The word "department" should never be abbreviated.

Correct	**Incorrect**
The department will hold a workshop.	The Department will hold a workshop.
E-OneStop	e-One Stop
One-Stop Permit Center	One Stop Permit Center
Department of Public Safety	department of Public Safety
The Public Works and Environmental Services departments	The Public Works and Environmental Services Departments
City of Sunnyvale Finance Department	Sunnyvale Finance Department
Sunnyvale Public Library	Sunnyvale Library
Sunnyvale Theatre	Sunnyvale Theater

SMaRT Station® (Registered trademark on first reference)	Sunnyvale SMaRT Station, SMART Station

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commas

- Do not put a comma before the conjunction in a simple series.
- Do use a comma before the conjunction in a complex series.
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Correct	**Incorrect**
The flag is red, white and blue.	The flag is red, white, and blue.
He likes turkey, peanut butter and jelly, and ham sandwiches.	He likes turkey, peanut butter and jelly and ham sandwiches.

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composition titles

- * Use italics without quotes for composition titles, e.g., books, plays, news articles, lectures, speeches and works of art.
- Capitalize the principal words, including prepositions and conjunctions of four or more letters.
- Capitalize articles or words of fewer than four letters if they are the first or last word in a title.

Correct	**Incorrect**
American Idol	American idol
The Associated Press Stylebook	“*The Associated Press Stylebook*”
Of Mice and Men	*Of Mice and men*

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councilmember

- One word.
- Use uppercase when used as a person’s title.
- Use lowercase when used collectively.

Correct	**Incorrect**
Councilmember Mary Jones	councilmember Mary Jones
Mary Jones, Sunnyvale City Councilmember	Mary Jones, Sunnyvale city councilmember
Sunnyvale city councilmembers	Sunnyvale City Councilmembers

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dates

- When a month is used with a specific date, abbreviate Jan., Feb., Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov., and Dec. Spell out all other months. **Tip:** Abbreviate any month longer than five letters.
- Do not abbreviate the month unless used with a specific date.
- Do not use "th," "nd," "st," or "rd" after a date, e.g., 10th, 22nd
- In lists and tables, this format is acceptable: 10/25/16, 03/02/16
- Use commas before and after the year when used with an exact date.

Correct	**Incorrect**
Jan. 2, 2008, was the coldest day of the month.	January 2, 2008, was the coldest day of the month.
Oct. 3 to 10, 2017	October 3, 2017 to October 10, 2017
January 2007 was a cold month.	Jan. 2007 was a cold month.
Jan. 2	Jan. 2nd
03/02/09	3/2/9, 03-02-09

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days of the week

- Capitalize days of the week.
- Do not abbreviate unless in tabular format (set up in rows or columns): Sun, Mon, Tue, Wed, Thu, Fri, Sat (three letters without periods).

Correct	**Incorrect**
The Sunnyvale City Council meeting will be held on Tuesday, Jan. 5, 2016.	The Sunnyvale City Council meeting will be held on Tue., Jan. 5, 2016.

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fiscal year

- In text, spell out fiscal year and do not capitalize.
- Use this format for one fiscal year: "fiscal year 2014/15"
- For multiple fiscal years: "fiscal years 2009/10 to 2013/14"
- Abbreviating fiscal years is acceptable. Use this format: FY 2015/16

Correct	**Incorrect**
The City's budget covers fiscal year 2006/07.	The City's budget covers Fiscal Year 2006-07.
The report includes FY 2006/07.	The report includes fy 2006-07.

General Fund

- General Fund refers to a specific City fund and may be capitalized in internal documents, or externally when referenced with the municipal organization name, e.g., “The City’s General Fund.”

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hashtag

- One word, capitalize first letter.
- For multiple words in a hashtag, capitalize as needed for clarity.

Correct	Incorrect
#WalkBike	#walkbike
#Sunnyvale	
#Sustainability	

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headings

- Use “title” case, i.e., upper and lowercase. Sometimes sentence-case headings are okay to use, for example when the heading is in the form of a question.
- Capitalize the principal words, including prepositions and conjunctions of four or more letters.

Correct	Incorrect
Doing Business in Sunnyvale	Doing business in Sunnyvale
	Doing Business In Sunnyvale
	DOING BUSINESS IN SUNNYVALE

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hyphens

- In general, the fewer hyphens the better. Hyphens are joiners. Use them to avoid ambiguity or to form a single idea from two or more words.
- Words ending in *ly* never use a hyphen, for example: *an easily remembered rule*
- Use a hyphen when using a compound modifier preceding a noun if it’s needed to make the meaning clear and avoid unintended meanings. For example: *small-business owner, little-known song, self-driving car*. No hyphen is needed when such terms are clear and unambiguous: *chocolate chip cookie, third grade teacher, parking lot entrance.*
- Use hyphens for ages expressed as adjectives before a noun or as substitute to a noun (4-year-old boy; 4-year-old).

- Use of hyphens with some words depends on their parts of speech:

Noun	Adjective	Verb
cleanup	cleanup	clean up
drop-off	drop-off	drop off
full time	full-time	---
kickoff	kickoff	kick off
login	login	log in
logoff	logoff	log off
logon	logon	log on
long term	long-term	---
nonresident	nonresident	---
nonprofit	nonprofit	---
off-site	off-site	---
on-site	on-site	---
part time	part-time	---
pickup	pickup	pick up
short term	short-term	---
sign-in	sign-in	sign in
sign-up	sign-up	sign up

Inclusive Language

The City of Sunnyvale works to use language that is inclusive, accessible and respectful.

See both the AP Stylebook and 18F Inclusive Language for more specifics, including how to reference nationality, race, ethnicity, mental illness, etc.

Gender-neutral

- Use gender-inclusive language using neutral terms instead of gendered alternatives.

Correct	**Incorrect**
business executive, manager	businesswoman
camera operator	cameraman
people, humanity	mankind
to staff, to run, to operate	to man
workforce, employees	manpower

Gender and Sexuality

- Use *different sex* instead of *opposite sex* (because this recognizes gender as a spectrum, rather than binary).
- Use *spouse* or *partner* instead of husband or wife; use *parent* instead of *mother* and *father.*
- You may use *they* or *theirs* as singular pronouns.

Correct	**Incorrect**
Residents should take out their garbage.	A resident should take out his or her garbage.

Age

- Avoid referring to someone's age unless it's relevant to what you're writing about (for example, when referring to benefits that are available to people of certain ages).

Ability and Disability

- Only reference a person's disability when it is relevant to what you're writing. If you must mention it, always emphasize the person before the disability. When writing about a person with disabilities, don't use the words *suffer*, *victim* or *handicapped*.

Correct	**Incorrect**
She has a disability.	She is disabled.
people with disabilities	disabled people
wheelchair user	confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound

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internet terms

- The *AP Stylebook* is transitioning toward removing hyphens from Internet terms, however in some instances changes are still pending; our standard will be not to use hyphens to be current with the industry.

Correct	**Incorrect**
Wi-Fi	WiFi, wifi, wi-fi
website	web site, Web site
webcast, webmaster	Web cast, Web master
webpage	Web page, web page
email	e-mail
online	on-line
internet	Internet
homepage	home page, Homepage
*eBook	e-book
*ePublish	e-publish

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links

- URLs should not include "www" if the link will function without it; test it to be sure.
- Print: Links in printed documents (both URLs and email addresses) should be italicized without underlining.
- Online: Links on the City's website will be formatted automatically by the cascading style sheets in the content management system and should not be modified. Online link and

email style formatting may differ from print documents (e.g., not italicized, not underlined).

Correct	**Incorrect**
Sunnyvale.ca.gov	www.Sunnyvale.ca.gov

numbers, dollars and dimensions

- Spell out numbers under 10, except for the ages of people and animals.
- Spell out a number at the beginning of the sentence, unless it identifies a calendar year.
- Use digits for 10 and over.
- For millions, billions, etc., use a figure followed by the word (13 million, 3 billion).
- Exception: May use abbreviations in finance documents with a multiplicity of figures, e.g., $3.5M, $1.5K
- Use numbers for terms of measurement and spell out *inches, feet, yards,* etc. (3 feet).
- Only use apostrophes to indicate feet and quote marks to indicate inches in tables and other areas where space is constrained (8.5’ by 11”); spell out *feet* and *inches* in all other cases. Use figures for numbers up to six digits (e.g., $650,000). For amounts of $1 million or more, use figures for up to two decimal places and spell out “million,” “billion,” etc. (e.g. $1.53 million, $2 billion)
- Use a hyphen for a dimension used as an adjective (e.g., 25-foot buffer zone).

Correct	**Incorrect**
The boy was 5 years old.	The boy was five years old.
There were four people at the meeting.	There were 4 people at the meeting.
Forty-five people attended the meeting.	45 people attended the meeting.
The workshop had more than 75 attendees.	The workshop had more than seventy-five attendees.
The street was flooded with 8 inches of water.	The street was flooded with 8” of water.

other jurisdictions and geographies

Correct	**Incorrect**
state	State
federal	Federal
North County	north county
Northern California	northern California
County of Santa Clara	county of Santa Clara
Bay Area, Bay Area-wide	bay area, bay area wide

percent and percentage

- Use the % sign when paired with a numeral, with no space.
- For amounts less than 1%, precede the decimal with a zero: *The cost of living rose 0.6%.*
- Use decimals, not fractions, in percentages: *Her mortgage rate is 4.5%.*
- Percent is one word.
- Use *percentage*, rather than *percent*, when not paired with a number: *The percentage of people agreeing is small.*
- When expressing a range, use “to” instead of “-”
- Spell out the percent when used at the beginning of a sentence, but try to avoid this construction.
- Be careful not to confuse *percent* with *percentage point*. A change from 10% to 13% is a rise of 3 percentage points. This is not equal to a 3% change; rather, it’s a 30% increase.

Correct	**Incorrect**
5%	5 percent
percent	per cent
He said 10% to 30% of the electorate might not vote.	He said 10 – 30% of the electorate might not vote.
Forty percent of land will be used as open space.	40% of land will be used as open space.

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periods

- Use one space after periods. Period.

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phone numbers

Always use the area code with phone numbers. Set off area code and number with dashes.

Correct	**Incorrect**
760-434-8537	(760) 434-8537, 434-8537 or 760.434.8537

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quotation marks

- The period and comma always go within the quotation marks.
- The dash, semicolon, colon, question mark and exclamation point go within the quotation marks when they apply to the quoted matter only. They go outside when they apply to the whole sentence: *Did the dog bark every time he heard Jim say “I’m bringing dinner”?*

Correct	**Incorrect**
“I love Sunnyvale,” she replied.	“I love Sunnyvale, she replied.”
“I love Sunnyvale.”	“I love Sunnyvale”.

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seasons

- Use lowercase for spring, summer, fall, winter and derivatives such as springtime unless part of a formal name (Summer Olympics, Horizon Spring 2019 Issue)

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slash (/)

- Avoid using a slash between words; use *and* or *or* as appropriate.
- Exceptions:
  - N/A - a common abbreviation for “not applicable” or “not available.” Use N/A only in tables and charts.
  - See *fiscal year*

Correct	**Incorrect**
Parks and trails	Parks/trails

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staff

- Nouns that denote a unit take singular verbs and pronouns. In external documents, avoid using *staff* and instead use *City of Sunnyvale* or a program name as applicable.
- When referring to discrete individuals, refer to them as *staff member* or *staff members*.

Correct	**Incorrect**
Staff is meeting to set its agenda.	Staff are meeting to set their agenda.
A staff member is responsible.	A member of staff is responsible.

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time

- Spell out “to” or “through” when mentioning a timeframe in a sentence.
  - Exception: Use an en-dash to replace “to” or “through” in timeframes that are presented in event listings or on calendars, posters, rack cards and other graphics.
- Use “noon” to indicate 12 p.m.
- No additional period is needed when a.m. or p.m. ends the sentence.

Correct	**Incorrect**
8 p.m.	8:00 p.m. or 8 pm
8:30 a.m., 8:30 p.m.	8:30 am, 8:30 pm
8 to 9:15 a.m.	8 a.m. to 9:15 a.m.

8 a.m. to 9:15 p.m.	8 a.m. - 9:15 p.m.
8 a.m. to noon	8 a.m. to 12 p.m.

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titles

- Lowercase unless immediately preceding a person’s name.
- Capitalize in signature blocks: *Jane Smith, City Manager*

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years

- When a phrase refers to a month and day within the current year, do not include the year: *The meeting is scheduled for July 18.*

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writing style

- First- or second-person writing style is preferred.
- Active voice is preferred.
  - Active voice example: The City began inspections in 1985.
  - Passive voice example: Inspections were begun by the City in 1985.

Spelling

This list contains the City’s preferred spelling for commonly used words.

bird-safe

canceled

child care

CityLine Sunnyvale

citywide

energy-efficient

flyer – AP Style update: for handbill, person flying in an aircraft

graywater

greenhouse gases

high-density

Moffett

reroof

sandbag

stormwater

wastewater

water-efficient